

The Creeds of the Church

Session 6—The History of the Augsburg Confession

I. A Review of the History of the Reformation

A. Martin Luther

Martin Luther was a German monk teaching Bible to divinity students at the University of Wittenberg in 1517. He was deeply moved by his study of Romans, which began to convince him that the Roman Church's emphasis on outward penance and other forms of good works was deeply flawed.

B. The sale of indulgences

What church historians now see as the catalyst for the Reformation proper, or the presenting issue which led to Luther's final break from Rome, was the increased frequency of the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church. This had begun in the crusade era, when soldiers were promised immediate remission of sins if they died in the fighting for Jerusalem. This was thought necessary because the church had been teaching that all sins needed to be paid for through penance, or else risk a longer stay in Purgatory or even Hell. So, if a Christian died before he could perform penance for a sin, he was out of luck. Thus, the crusaders needed a special dispensation. This was called an indulgence. From there, it was a short step to offering indulgences to everyone, for a price (the justification being that it was just as good to *finance* a good work as to perform the good work oneself).

John Tetzel is the name we most often associate with this practice, but he was only the most charismatic figure involved. The indulgences that Tetzel sold were certificates that purported to free the bearer from the need to do penance for sins. These indulgences were sold to raise money for various Church projects, notably—in the case of Tetzel—for the building of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

C. Luther's 95 Theses

Since the sale of indulgences hinged on the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation coming from faith *and* good works, Luther was deeply troubled by Tetzel's impious sale of indulgences. In response, Luther proposed a frank discussion about the current abuses of biblical doctrine within the Roman Church. He proposed this discussion by composing 95 propositions to be debated and posting them on the castle door in Wittenberg.

NB: This act is often seen as a counter-cultural act of rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church, but when Luther posted the *95 Theses* in 1517, he still considered himself a good Catholic with some well-intentioned questions about what he observed happening at the local level of the church hierarchy. A careful

reading of the *95 Theses* reveals that he was giving the Pope the benefit of the doubt, assuming that he must not have been aware of the abuses that Luther was observing, and assuming that he would address them properly when made aware.

Luther's *Theses* were (unknown to him) copied and published in the form of a pamphlet and distributed around Germany. Luther had himself sent a copy of his *Theses* to the archbishop of Mainz, who sent it on to Pope Leo X. The pope summoned Luther to appear and defend himself on charges of heresy. But by this time, the German nobles were largely mobilized in favor of Luther, due to their natural dislike of Roman overreach. In particular, Elector Frederick "the Wise" of Saxony emerged as a powerful defender of Luther. As a result, the pope acquiesced to Frederick, disowned Tetzl, and adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy toward Luther.

But the debate continued and culminated in an actual public debate in Leipzig between Luther and John Eck, in which Luther publicly stated that he considered John Hus to have been a true Christian, that general councils and the pope could err, and that doctrine must flow right out of the Bible and could not simply be established by the church. These views forced the pope to take more drastic action.

D. The Diet of Worms (1521)

The pope, together with the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, summoned Luther to appear at another Diet, in the city of Worms. The basic purpose of the Diet was to get Luther to recant the things he had said. He refused, unless shown from Scripture how he was wrong.

Luther was allowed to leave the Diet, but after his departure he was formally excommunicated and the Emperor Charles added his own judgment against Luther, demanding that no German citizen offer him any help or hospitality.

II. The Diet of Augsburg (1530)

A. The situation in Germany

1. Luther as outlaw and ex-communicant

By 1530, Luther had been formally excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church and declared an outlaw by the Holy Roman Emperor. Anyone who found him could kill him. Nevertheless, the German nobles are still either mostly supportive of Luther or at least *not* supportive of Charles or the pope, so Luther was largely safe.

2. Elector John “the Steadfast” of Saxony

Elector Frederick died in 1525 and was succeeded by his brother John. John was equally friendly to Luther and the cause that came to be known as “Protestantism.” He protected Luther, despite his status as outlaw, thus allowing him space and time for his work. It was during this time that Luther translated the Bible into German and continued to organize the churches in Germany into his vision of what biblical church structure should be.

3. The Turkish threat

In 1530, Charles V, who had been elected as the Holy Roman Emperor a decade earlier by the German electors, finally received a formal coronation as such from the pope in Rome (after invading Italy and holding Rome hostage). Returning to Germany, he wanted a unified front to face the growing threat from the Turks. But because a large majority of the German nobility was sympathetic to the Protestant cause and suspicious of Charles himself, he couldn’t just insist that they adhere to the Catholic faith. So, he called the Diet of Augsburg to address the divisions in the church.

B. The calling of the Diet

1. The accusations against Luther by John Eck

Charles assured everyone that each side would be heard in full at the Diet of Augsburg. At the council itself, John Eck emerged again as the chief opponent of Luther’s teaching. Eck accused Luther and his followers not only of the doctrinal differences that had actually gotten Luther excommunicated in the first place, but also of many other truly heretical teachings that were absurd. Eck lumped Luther in with the other reforming groups like the Anabaptists and Radical Reformers. He also accused him of Arianism.

2. The composition of the Confession

The actual Augsburg Confession was the result of a combination of factors. Luther (through his representative Philip Melancthon) had prepared merely to explain the points of doctrine where he differed from Rome. These points were outlined in a short document called the Torgau Articles (named after the city in which they were written).

But when Eck started levying his accusations, it became obvious that they would have to add more detail to their statement of beliefs, in order to defend themselves against his charges. So, Melancthon expanded their

statement of faith, based on the Torgau Articles, together with the Swabach Articles (originally composed a year earlier to compare their beliefs with Ulrich Zwingli's). The result is our received Augsburg Confession.

3. The delivery and reception of the Confession

The Confession was signed by nine leading German nobles and read aloud in a meeting of the Diet before the Emperor. The Roman clerics and the Emperor asked that the Confession be read in Latin (ostensibly because this was the language of theology at the time, but probably really to limit its impact on those who were present). Elector John of Saxony is reported to have replied to him, "We are Germans and are on German soil, so Your Imperial Majesty will also permit us to speak the German language." The Confession was read loudly enough to be heard by the 200 people in the room and by many others who had crowded around to hear it read.

Supposedly, the Roman Catholic clerics present were all surprised by the Confession's relative moderation (especially given Luther's by now famous reputation for fiery obduracy). The Bishop of Augsburg is reported to have said that it contained nothing but the truth.

Nevertheless, the Diet eventually condemned the Confession and ordered all the Protestant states of Germany to return to the Catholic faith or face excommunication.